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## **Cut ICC tolls in half, double the traffic**

In Montgomery County and Prince George's County, there's a highway so devoid of vehicles it feels like an airport runway — the 18-mile, \$3 billion Intercounty Connector (ICC). Unusually high tolls — \$8 round-trip tolls for cars and \$60 round-trip tolls for trucks — during rush hour, and tolls only slightly lower most of the rest of the day, prevent or deter many drivers from using it. The Maryland Transportation Authority, whose members Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) appoints, could quickly reduce the tolls to make the ICC appealing and useful to many more people.

Dramatically reducing tolls on the ICC, especially for regular commuters, as is done on other state toll facilities including the Bay Bridge and Fort McHenry Tunnel, would shift traffic from congested roads to the underused ICC. Commuting to work on the ICC from Gaithersburg to Laurel costs \$2,000 annually, because Maryland provides absolutely no discount on tolls for regular commuters on the ICC. Why aren't ICC commuters getting the same deep discounts as their counterparts in Baltimore and on the Eastern Shore? Why are Montgomery and Prince George's state lawmakers silent on this issue?

Last month, I proposed that the MTA cut ICC tolls in half for a year to draw commuters to the highway, but the MTA responded, "not at this time."

What is the MTA waiting for? Because of excessive tolls, there is a long stretch of highway in the middle of Montgomery County operating at a tiny fraction of its capacity during rush hour, and even less the rest of the day. Yet, the MTA stubbornly insists the ICC is meeting its traffic targets. That's setting the bar at ankle level and declaring success after stepping over it. The MTA says it expects the ICC will be at capacity around 2030. In the meantime, many drivers on other roads will sit in traffic unnecessarily.

The MTA has set tolls much higher than necessary to keep the ICC free of congestion. Pricing the ICC as if it's an unavoidable bridge or tunnel is fundamentally misguided. So is setting toll rates as if the ICC were a private road rather than a public highway. Since tax dollars paid half the cost of the ICC, tolls should be broadly affordable. The very high tolls charged during rush hour keep many commuters off the ICC who would otherwise use it regularly and help pay off the bonds that are backed by toll revenue. Not only are the current toll rates inequitable, they undermine the ICC's ability to substantially relieve traffic on other roads — a point I made in 2005 when responding to then-proposed round-trip tolls of \$7.

If tolls were cut in half and traffic doubled on the ICC, it would produce the same amount of revenue to pay off the bonds, while substantially increasing use of the highway and relieving traffic on congested roads. I opposed building the ICC for many reasons, including concerns about whether the highway would be cost-effective. But it's here. An unused highway is in no one's interest.

Rather than spending tax dollars for ads to encourage drivers to use the ICC, the MTA should dramatically reduce toll prices to increase sales, a strategy that successful businesses use. After a full year's experience of very high tolls and very low use of the ICC, the MTA should act now.

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